

PERSONAL NARRATIVES
OF THE
BATTLES OF THE REBELLION,
BEING
PAPERS READ BEFORE THE
RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS
HISTORICAL SOCIETY.
No. 3.

*“Quaeque ipse miserrima vidi,
Et quorum pars magna fui.”*

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REMINISCENCES OF SERVICE
IN THE
FIRST RHODE ISLAND CAVALRY

BY
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THE History of the First Rhode Island Cavalry was published in the summer of 1876, and as I was called upon to contribute to that whatever I could recall of interest in my experience as a soldier in the regiment, I find myself not a little puzzled to decide how I can make a satisfactory response to the demands of this society for more tales of a soldier. I can promise you no connected story, but will try to give such disconnected reminiscences as I may be able to recall of war times.

The first permanent camp occupied by the regiment in Virginia will never be forgotten by those who struggled for existence amid the desolations of "Camp Mud." On the seventh of April, 1862, at

Warrenton Junction, a few miles north of the Rap-pahannock River, the regiment went into camp in an old cornfield, just as the rain commenced falling, and for three days rain, hail and snow showered upon our defenceless heads. We had no tents, but each man had been furnished with a strip of rubber cloth, so that two or three men, by uniting the pieces, could make what the soldiers called "dog tents,"—a sort of a letter A arrangement,—to enter which a man got down upon his hands and knees, crawled into the tent, and by shutting himself up like a jack-knife might, with the use of a vigorous imagination, consider himself under a roof. The men had never used these before, and for want of that knowledge which was to come to them as veterans they soon found themselves thoroughly soaked, lying under their tents in mud, so wet that as a man turned over you could hear the splashing of the water. On the second day of the storm, a few soldiers having gained a shelter from the rain beneath the canvas covering of an army wagon, some one suggested that a song might add cheerfulness to the situation, and the camp was astounded by the strains,

“What peaceful hours I once enjoyed,
How sweet their memory still”;

sung in a manner that left no doubt as to the earnestness and sincerity of the minstrels. The railroad from Washington was not in running order, and we were therefore without forage for the horses or rations for the men, except so far as we were able to secure partial supplies by vigorous foraging, and when, at last, after three days of misery, the sun shone forth upon a camp looking like a gigantic mortar bed, horses stood at the picket lines dead in the mud, while saddles, bridles and arms were buried in the red clay soil. A man finding a leather strap upon the surface would by a vigorous pull ascertain that there was a saddle at the other end beneath the mud. These three days were the most miserable of our army life, and yet our suffering was in a great degree owing to the want of that soldierly knowledge which soon came to us in the active campaigns of the war. That same year, in December, 1862, the regiment encamped in a swamp during a furious snow storm, and yet in half an hour afterwards, horses stood at the picket lines con-

tentedly feeding, while at hundreds of fires men were frying pork, making coffee and generally enjoying the situation as though that swamp had always been their home and a very comfortable one at that; the dog tents were pitched in orderly array, each company by itself, while within beds were so constructed of pine boughs as to render the water splashing of old "Camp Mud" an impossibility. We remained at Camp Mud nearly a month, and yet it never was as comfortable as this swamp camp, where we tarried but a night. The difference was simply this: at the first camp we were raw troops, at the second we were veterans. We had gained by experience a faculty of adaptation to circumstances and a knowledge as to how to take care of ourselves, for want of which many a life was lost during the first months of campaigning.

Detachments of the regiment had been under fire at different times, and at Front Royal, May thirtieth, 1862, a hundred men of the New Hampshire Battalion had, by a gallant charge, driven from the town the Twelfth Georgia infantry regiment, a troop of cavalry and a section of artillery, capturing one

hundred and twenty of the enemy and recapturing twenty prisoners, men of our own army, with a loss of eight killed and seven wounded upon our side, but as a whole the regiment was under fire for the first time at the battle of Cedar Mountain, August ninth, 1862. Colonel Alfred N Duffié had taken command of the regiment upon the eighth of July, 1862, and after a month of hard drilling was to test his work for the first time in battle. Perhaps a little incident, occurring at the time he gave his first order on dress parade, may give, in some degree, a picture of the man. When the first order was given with the peculiar accent of the Frenchman, some men in line laughed loud enough to reach the quick ears of the Colonel. Instantly he responded, "what for you laugh? I make you laugh!" There was nothing in the words, but something in the tone and manner in which the soldiers recognized at once a master, and the offence was never repeated.

On the night of August eighth, 1862, the regiment was upon picket duty at the front, and on the morning of the ninth we were in line of battle, facing Cedar Mountain, with the exception of Major Far-

rington's battalion (Preston M.), which was deployed as skirmishers. About noon a rebel battery threw a few shells at our regiment, and our batteries replying, the firing ceased in a few minutes without much damage upon either side. Between three and four o'clock in the afternoon the batteries upon the mountain side opened fire again, throwing shell intended for our regiment, but the firing was too high and they passed over our heads. At the same time a heavy infantry force was driving in our skirmishers. About sixty yards from our right wing was a dense forest. Major Farrington was ordered to withdraw his skirmish line and form his battalion in its proper place on the right of the other two battalions and next to the before-mentioned wood. Before the movement could be completed the rebel infantry line reached the edge of the wood, and halting there opened a heavy fire from pieces loaded with one ball and three buckshot, while the rebel shell from the artillery in our front whistled merrily over our heads. Nevertheless, the Colonel calmly waited until the alignment was completed, and then came the ringing order: "*Squadrons, Left Wheel, Form*

Close Column!" but by some misunderstanding Major Farrington's two squadrons made a left wheel before the Colonel had given the order, "MARCH," while the remainder of the regiment stood firm, waiting for the proper command. With an oath the Colonel struck his horse with the spurs and dashing up to the luckless Major, astonished him with a torrent of reproaches, shouting, "What a sickness; what a business; I be like you, I go buy one rope, I go hang myself;" and then by his orders the two squadrons were reined back into line and again the order came, "*Squadrons, Left Wheel, Form Close Column, MARCH!*" and the order was executed with the same care and attention to all the details which were usual upon the drilling ground. This evolution brought the men with their backs towards the rebel infantry, and seeing some of the men turn uneasily in their saddles and look towards the enemy, that grim old joker, Lieutenant Hiram P. Barker, comforted them with, "You might as well keep quiet boys, you can't get away." The next order from the Colonel was, "*By Platoons to the Front, MARCH,*" followed shortly by, "*Head of Col-*

umn to the Left,” and after two squadrons had turned to the left, “*Left into line, WHEEL!*” and on the head of third squadron, “*Front into line, face to the rear, MARCH!*” which order, promptly executed, left us fronting the enemy again, with our batteries just behind us, firing over our heads at the rebel batteries. This position was one which showed good military judgment upon the part of our Colonel. We were sheltered by the nature of the ground, occupying, as we did, a little depression in a cornfield,—a few yards further to the front or rear would have exposed us to heavy loss, as the rebel shell fell thick both in our front and rear,—and yet we were ready for a dash at the enemy at any moment had orders for an advance been given. We held this position an hour or two, when by orders from General Banks we were withdrawn to the rear. Although thus exposed to the enemy’s fire at the front for two or three hours, our loss was only three killed, six wounded and four missing. That it was so small was entirely due to the military skill and good judgment of Colonel Duffié in forming his line in such a position that the shot and shell of the enemy either

struck the ground in front of us or passed over our heads. This experience was of great value to the regiment; the men acquired confidence in their officers and in each other, and ever afterwards felt themselves veterans, with a good reputation which was to be maintained. The day was intensely hot, and Lieutenant James P. Taylor received a sun-stroke which caused his death upon the morning of the following day, August tenth.

During the winter of 1862 and 1863 the cavalry of the army of the Potomac was for the first time put into condition to be effective in the service. Previous to that time it had been scattered about as escorts, body guards, and generally so disposed as to have no opportunity for proper drill and other preparation for discharging its appropriate duty as a distinct arm of the military service, so that when General Joe Hooker said, "who ever saw a dead cavalryman?" there was a general roar of laughter throughout the army. General Stoneman having been assigned to command the cavalry of the Army of the Potomac, the regiments were massed near Potomac Creek Bridge, a few miles north of Freder-

icksburg and the Cavalry Corps organized. In obedience to orders, all officers, both commissioned and non-commissioned, were set to work studying the cavalry tactics, and regular recitations were holden evenings by the light of candles in the officers' tents. The non-commissioned officers recited their lessons to the senior captain in each squadron, the commissioned officers in each battalion recited to the majors, and at certain stated times the majors and captains were assembled at the colonel's tent and examined as to their knowledge in tactics. In addition to these military studies the cavalry was daily exercised upon the drill-ground in squadron, battalion and regimental drill, while occasional brigade drills and division reviews gave the generals practice in the movements of large bodies of troops. The study and drill of this winter produced a cavalry corps which was ever after respected in our own army and dreaded by the enemy. Colonel Duffié, who commanded at this time a brigade, had considerable trouble in bringing one regiment, the Fourth New York, into a proper condition as regarded drill; there were said to be fifty-three dif-

ferent languages and dialects spoken in that regiment, and the Colonel thus explained his troubles: "The colonel of the Fourth New York, he give an order, all the officer they stick up their head, they holler like one geese."

At Kelley's Ford, March seventeenth, 1863, was given the first opportunity, after the formation of the cavalry corps, for a fair combat with the rebel cavalry in an open field. Kelley's Ford is situated upon the Rappahannock River some thirty miles above Fredericksburg; when our troops approached the north bank of the ford they found the enemy had constructed a strong barricade upon that side, and that a hundred rebel riflemen, protected by pits upon the south side, were ready to dispute the passage of the river. The Fourth New York were ordered to charge across the ford. They charged down to the barricade and then charged back again. At this moment Major Chamberlain of the First Massachusetts Cavalry, a staff officer, came to the First Rhode Island Cavalry and said, "I want a platoon of men who will go where I tell them." He was given a platoon of eighteen men, commanded by

Lieutenant Simeon Brown, and started with them for the ford. The Major told Lieutenant Brown he wished him to charge across the river and drive the enemy out of the rifle pits, but just as he finished his instructions by saying, "If you do that it will be a good thing for you," the Major was himself hit by two rifle bullets, one cutting off the tip of his nose and the other entering his mouth, and taking such a course as finally led to its extraction from between his shoulders. Leaving the wounded Major the Lieutenant pressed forward in pursuit of "the good thing." Only one horse could leap the barricade at a time, and the swiftly flowing water was breast high upon the horses, but the gallant officer and his brave men pressed boldly forward, with the rifle bullets hissing and singing about them; horses went down in the surging water, pierced by bullets; men were struck from the saddle by the deadly fire, but the column still advanced. At last Lieutenant Brown rode his horse up to the edge of a rifle pit in which eight rebels were lying, and every man had his rifle aimed at the Lieutenant, but not one fired, so astonished were they at such a spectacle. Before

the enemy could recover from their stupor, the Lieutenant had wheeled his horse, galloped a few yards to the right and dismounted behind a tree. Here he was joined by two of his men, who had also succeeded in crossing the river, and taking their carbines, he opened a raking fire upon the nearest rifle pit, killing two men and wounding a third. The rebels could not leave the rifle pits without exposing themselves to a heavy fire from our men lining the opposite bank of the river, which fact protected the Lieutenant in his flanking operations. The rebels were discouraged by the fact that in spite of their fire some of our men had succeeded in crossing the river, and our men were correspondingly encouraged by the same fact, and so, when the rebels saw another column leaping the barricade for the passage of the river, they abandoned the rifle pits and made a sharp run for their horses. But they were not quite quick enough, and twenty-five of them were captured. Of the eighteen men who followed the Lieutenant only three succeeded in reaching the opposite shore, the others having been stopped by bullets either in the horse or his rider. Lieutenant

Brown rode a white horse; five bullets passed through his clothing and three lodged in his horse, yet not a drop of blood was drawn upon the officer, and the horse soon recovered from his wounds. General Hooker, at that time commanding the army of the Potomac, sent for Lieutenant Brown to come to his tent and personally thanked him for this gallant deed, and on his recommendation the Lieutenant was promoted to the grade of captain; but alas, he escaped the dangers of battle only to die at home of disease contracted in the service.

The cavalry combat of which this was merely the beginning, is fully described in the History of the Regiment, and I will not repeat it here, but content myself by observing that upon this day the First Rhode Island Cavalry met, with the sabre on an open field, three separate charges of General Stuart's best Virginia cavalry and was victorious each time. At the beginning of the action Major Farrington was wounded by a bullet through the neck, inflicting a severe and dangerous wound, but after having his wound dressed at the field hospital he returned to his regiment and led it in two successful charges

against the enemy. This affair at Kelley's Ford was a small affair so far as damage inflicted upon the enemy or loss upon our side was concerned, but the moral effect was of priceless value. Our men were fully convinced that they were superior to the rebel cavalry, and were confident that they could always beat them by a charge with the sabre, and from that day until the war closed our cavalry never failed to defeat the enemy on every occasion where they had an opportunity to charge with the sabre. This action also demonstrated the fact that our cavalry was superior to the enemy in drill and tactics; the charges of the enemy were made in column, eight abreast, which our cavalry met with regimental front, thus outflanking the enemy upon both sides, which of itself rendered certain the defeat of the rebel cavalry. The enemy were certainly very much surprised by the vigorous and brilliant charges of our men, and years after a rebel cavalryman said to the writer of these lines, who was then a prisoner of war: "Your men never fought with the sabre so well as they did at Kelley's Ford."

About the time of the battle of Chancellorville,

in May, 1863, the North was very much interested in the draft, and at this time I saw, one day walking along the road, two soldiers who had evidently just left a field hospital—one having the right arm, the other the left arm amputated at the shoulder; they were both pale and weak from loss of blood and the shock of the operation. Suddenly I saw the face of one of them, who was a short distance in advance of the other, break into a smile from some thought that pleased him, and stopping and turning towards his comrade, he said: "I say, Jim, we'll be out of the draft."

At Middleburg, Virginia, June eighteenth, 1863, a rebel soldier demanded of Lawrence Cronan, a corporal in Company C, the surrender of the guidon, a small swallow-tailed United States flag which he carried as a company color, and being refused he sent a bullet through Cronan's left arm and breast; but to the astonishment of the rebel, Cronan rode off with the flag as though nothing had happened. Our men charged the enemy and drove them from the field a few minutes later, and Cronan, faint from loss of blood, surrendered the flag to a comrade and

was left behind to fall into the enemy's hands as a prisoner. Later, however, in the same day Cronan was recaptured by Union cavalry and sent to the hospital in Washington, where he soon recovered from his wound, rejoined his regiment and served until the end of the war. This incident happened in a wheat field, and I shall never forget the wrath of the Southern planter, who stood upon his piazza and cursed, with equal vigor and impartiality, the soldiers of both armies as the horses trampled ruthlessly under foot the waving grain.

The story of war's desolation is as old as the history of man, and yet no written statements can reproduce the pictures which linger in the memory of soldiers who have seen for themselves the ruin and destruction inseparable from the movement of an army. When the army of the Potomac encamped in front of Fredericksburg, Virginia, in the autumn of 1862, much of the country was covered with a heavy growth of timber; the soldiers first cut down the trees several feet above the ground; then, as wood became less abundant, they cut the stumps close down to the ground, and finally dug up the stumps

and the spreading roots for fuel, doing the work so thoroughly that it would have been difficult to have found a root as large as a man's finger in the ground which had a few months before been covered with the vigorous growth of the forest. Certainly no land was ever more effectually cleared for the plow, but how the owners of the soil managed to re-establish their boundary lines, with every fence, tree and landmarks generally destroyed for miles in all directions, puzzles the imagination.

On the seventeenth day of August, 1864, orders were issued for the destruction of all the wheat and hay south of a line from Millwood to Winchester and Petticoat Gap in the Valley of the Shenandoah, Virginia, and for the seizure of all mules, horses and cattle that might be useful to the army. Shenandoah means, in the Indian language, "daughter of the stars"—a name well merited by the bright silvery waters of this mountain stream, flowing through one of the most beautiful valleys in the world, with a soil so fertile as to have gained for it the name of "the garden of Virginia." This seventeenth day of August, 1864, was a perfect summer day; not a

cloud obscured the pathway of the sun ; the mountain peaks were clearly outlined against the horizon, while all the level lowland seemed smiling with the well-filled barns and huge stacks of an abundant harvest. Such was the scene upon which the sun rose, but soon the wasting flames were seen blazing in all directions ; barns, cribs and stacks soon changed to dust and ashes ; women and children, with tears streaming down their wretched cheeks, begged the stern soldiers to spare them the food necessary to keep them from starving in the fast approaching winter. It was pitiful, but the soldiers could not spare ; their hard duty was to obey orders. It is estimated that, upon this single day, enough of the finest wheat in the world to subsist a hundred thousand men for a year was destroyed, and that in a few weeks twenty-five million dollars worth of property was swept from the face of the valley under this order. Never did man pen more truthful words than General Sherman's famous sentence, " War is cruelty and you cannot refine it."

On many a night when the cavalry halted for a camp, in every regiment could be heard the orders,

"Prepare to dismount!—Dis-mount!—numbers one and three hold the horses, numbers two and four go and get rails," and soon thousands of camp fires were blazing with the fencing materials of the farms. At night the well kept fences clearly marked the farmer's fields; in the morning, far as the eye could reach there was nothing to show that a fence had ever existed, and the whole country was laid open as a common. The whole face of the landscape had been changed in a single night, so that it might puzzle the oldest inhabitant to recognize his familiar haunts. Can you imagine the farmer looking about his premises on the following morning; the soldiers have passed away like a troubled dream, and so have his cattle, sheep and horses, with all his wheat, hay, corn, oats, and everything else that could be devoured by man or beast. But yesterday he was the owner of a thriving and well appointed farm; today there remains only empty buildings and desolate fields. Surely, in sympathy with misfortune, we may pardon something to the planter who on such an occasion exclaimed, in the fullness of his heart, "I wish all the soldiers in both armies were rammed, jammed, right slap into hell."

The Fourth New York Cavalry has received notices already in this paper, but not of a favorable nature. Its colonel was an Italian count, Cesnola by name—the same man who has recently attracted public notice by his discovery of antiquities while serving this country as Consul at Cyprus, in the Mediterranean. Colonel Cesnola was a gallant officer, but found it difficult to make soldiers out of the motley mass that composed his regiment and finally in June, 1863, he was taken prisoner by reason of the bad conduct of his men. After ten months experience as a prisoner of war, he was returned to his regiment, and resumed command of it with a determination to retrieve the reputation of the regiment. He said: "I propose to put these rascals through a course of drill and discipline until on some occasion they distinguish themselves in battle, and the moment they have done that I shall resign." He carried these intentions strictly into effect, and at last on the fifteenth day of August, 1864, he charged at the head of the Fourth New York two rebel regiments of infantry and put them to rout, capturing two battle flags and an hundred and fifty prisoners; and

while the army was ringing with the first news of this gallant deed of arms, Colonel Cesnola sat in his tent writing a resignation of his commission. He said: "I cannot depend upon them; they have covered me with glory to-day, they may disgrace me to-morrow" Colonel Cesnola's military history was a striking illustration of the power of a brave and determined officer to achieve brilliant success with the most unpromising material in the rank and file of his regiment.

The popular idea of a cavalryman is that of a soldier mounted on a spirited horse, dashing through the enemy's country at a gallop; but in reality cavalry always move at a walk, except in the immediate presence of the enemy, and three miles and a half an hour was a good rate of speed for the advance of a column of cavalry. On a hot, still summer day, the red clay, pulverized into dust as fine as flour, would rise in such blinding clouds that a man could not see his comrade riding a few paces in front of him; and then, after hours of dusty experience, a thunder shower would turn these dusty accumulations into liquid mud, and so change a man's per-

sonal appearance that his own mother could not have recognized him. The cavalryman about to leave camp would have strapped upon his saddle three pecks of oats, a gray woolen blanket, a rubber blanket, an overcoat, canteen, etc., while upon his person would be strapped a carbine, pistol, and sabre, with ammunition, and a haversack containing eight days rations ; and when a soldier mounted his horse thus laden down the reasons for moving at a walk were plainly visible. Yet, with all the care and precaution that could be taken, the loss of horses in the army was enormous, and it was estimated that the average life of a horse in the service was only four months. When Sheridan moved up the Valley of the Shenandoah in September, 1864, it was estimated there were eight thousand horses in his army, and out of this small number the provost guard, at the rear of the column, was obliged to shoot on an average a hundred horses a day ; most of these animals would have been in good condition for service if they could have had a week's rest, but if they could not keep up with the column it was necessary to shoot them, otherwise the native population would

have run them off into the mountain pastures and they would soon have had rebel soldiers on their backs.

After three years service in the field it was my fortune to be a prisoner of war, and as such I lived about four months in Libby Prison, forty-five days of which I passed in a cell as a hostage for a rebel soldier sentenced to be hung. Much has been written upon prison life, and I will give only one or two incidents in connection with my experience. Our food consisted of black beans or peas, sometimes called cow peas, and corn bread, made, as it seemed to us, from corn ground up with the cob and grain together, and occasionally a little meat or salt fish. The beans were the vilest food I ever ate; each one had either a fly or a worm in it, and the taste was that rank flavor peculiar to a sun-burned potato. The food was, of course, insufficient, and we were always hungry; and as the food for a squad of men was delivered in bulk to one of the number selected as a commissary, the division of the rations required exact and careful judgment. The beans were divided by measurement with a very small tin

cup, while the bread and meat were carefully divided into separate portions by the commissary. In our cell there were five men, so five little piles were made, and after, by weighing in his hands and numerous inspections by the eye, taking a little from this pile and adding a little to another, the commissary had made the portions as nearly equal as possible, one of our number was turned with his back to the food, when the commissary, placing his finger upon a portion, said, "who shall have this?" In response a comrade's name was given, and so on until all the rations were distributed—a method which avoided all dispute as to any possible unfairness in the division. Each night we cut a notch upon a board and congratulated each other upon the fact that "another day of misery had gone." At length on the fifth day of February, 1865, the hostages, nine in number, all commissioned officers, and about a thousand men of our rank and file, went on board the rebel flag of truce boat and passed down the James river *en route* for that happy land, which a prisoner always called "God's Country."

As I looked about on the boat at my fellow prisoners, I noticed that their confinement and hardships seemed to have taken the human expression out of their features and substituted for it the fierce and brutal appearance of hungry animals. I saw two men fighting for a bone a well fed dog would not have looked at ; and yet, these men knew that they would soon be inside the Union lines and supplied with abundant food. The rebel officials upon the boat treated our little squad of officers very kindly, and calling us into a small room they gave us some excellent boiled mutton and corn bread of the finest quality. As it was a little crowded I stepped out of the room with the food in my hands ; instantly a soldier rushed towards me with both hands extended to seize the food, and without saying a word I gave it to him. He said : "Excuse me, sir ; when I saw that food I could not resist the temptation to reach forward and seize it ; I was a man once, I am nothing but a brute now ; only the animal instincts remain." I have always regretted that I did not learn this man's name ; it was no common mind that could thus realize the degradation to which his sufferings had reduced him.

I cannot describe to you the scene when these weary and broken prisoners first caught sight of the old flag; tears streamed down the cheeks of men who had endured prison hardship and suffering without a murmur; that flag seemed to mean for them not alone the symbol of their country—it represented home, food, friends and all that could render life desirable. On board our own flag of truce boat hot coffee and abundant food was at once furnished to the released men, who were so excited by the joy of freedom that they could not sleep when night came, and hardly a man slept during the first twenty-four hours. There seemed to be a universal desire upon the part of each man to give a full account of his prison life, and if he could find anyone to listen the story was given in full.

There was among the officers one man so lank and emaciated as to have received the nickname, "Slim Jim of the bone yard." This man was suddenly seized with a severe fit of spasms, about three o'clock in the morning of our first night upon our flag of truce boat, and the hospital steward hastened to his relief with a bottle of brandy; after the sick man

was relieved somewhat and the steward was about to go to his stateroom, a New Jersey major astonished him with the demand, "Leave that bottle of brandy here; there will be another case of spasms in less than fifteen minutes." The disgusted steward thought a trick had been played upon him, but as a matter of fact the sickness of Jim was a reality, and it was natural for a New Jersey man to wish for some of the remedy.

I will close this fragmentary sketch by saying that for myself I hope war may never again come to blast and sear our fair land, and I cannot believe any soldier here would wish again to see such days as when Whittier sang,

"The battle flags like storm birds fly,
The charging trumpets blow."

